

USAWC STRATEGY RESEARCH PROJECT

AN EXAMINATION OF GEORGE WASHINGTON'S  
EMPLOYMENT OF THE PENNSYLVANIA MILITIA  
AT THE BATTLES OF TRENTON AND PRINCETON

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This SRP is submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the Master of Strategic Studies Degree. The U.S. Army War College is accredited by the Commission on Higher Education of the Middle States Association of Colleges and Schools, 3624 Market Street, Philadelphia, PA 19104, (215) 662-5606. The Commission on Higher Education is an institutional accrediting agency recognized by the U.S. Secretary of Education and the Council for Higher Education Accreditation.

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U.S. Army War College  
CARLISLE BARRACKS, PENNSYLVANIA 17013

Report Documentation Page			Form Approved OMB No. 0704-0188		
Public reporting burden for the collection of information is estimated to average 1 hour per response, including the time for reviewing instructions, searching existing data sources, gathering and maintaining the data needed, and completing and reviewing the collection of information. Send comments regarding this burden estimate or any other aspect of this collection of information, including suggestions for reducing this burden, to Washington Headquarters Services, Directorate for Information Operations and Reports, 1215 Jefferson Davis Highway, Suite 1204, Arlington VA 22202-4302. Respondents should be aware that notwithstanding any other provision of law, no person shall be subject to a penalty for failing to comply with a collection of information if it does not display a currently valid OMB control number.					
1. REPORT DATE <b>18 MAR 2005</b>		2. REPORT TYPE		3. DATES COVERED -	
4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE <b>An Examination of George Washington's Employment of the Pennsylvania Militia at the Battles of Trenton and Princeton</b>				5a. CONTRACT NUMBER	
				5b. GRANT NUMBER	
				5c. PROGRAM ELEMENT NUMBER	
6. AUTHOR(S) <b>William Miller</b>				5d. PROJECT NUMBER	
				5e. TASK NUMBER	
				5f. WORK UNIT NUMBER	
7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) <b>U.S. Army War College, Carlisle Barracks, Carlisle, PA, 17013-5050</b>				8. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER	
9. SPONSORING/MONITORING AGENCY NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES)				10. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S ACRONYM(S)	
				11. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S REPORT NUMBER(S)	
12. DISTRIBUTION/AVAILABILITY STATEMENT <b>Approved for public release; distribution unlimited</b>					
13. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES					
14. ABSTRACT <b>See attached.</b>					
15. SUBJECT TERMS					
16. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF:			17. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT	18. NUMBER OF PAGES <b>30</b>	19a. NAME OF RESPONSIBLE PERSON
a. REPORT <b>unclassified</b>	b. ABSTRACT <b>unclassified</b>	c. THIS PAGE <b>unclassified</b>			



## ABSTRACT

AUTHOR: Lieutenant Colonel William P. Miller  
TITLE: An Examination of George Washington's Employment of The Pennsylvania Militia at the Battles of Trenton and Princeton  
FORMAT: Strategy Research Project  
DATE: 25 February 2005 PAGES: 30 CLASSIFICATION: Unclassified

The short winter campaign of 1776-1777, including the Battles of Trenton and Princeton, is one of the most important campaigns of the Revolutionary War. This short campaign kept the colonial army and the revolutionary cause alive at a critical time.

All combat units are not equal. Washington knew it during this campaign, just as we know it now. As a strategic leader his mission was to capitalize on the strengths of each available unit by assigning it appropriate missions, while at the same time minimizing the risks to the unit. By looking at his employment of the Pennsylvania militia and Associators at Trenton and Princeton, we can see that Washington was developing good techniques for maximizing the effectiveness of the militiamen.

In this short campaign George Washington took maximum advantage of the militia's strengths and used them mainly in supporting attacks, economy of force missions and as security forces designed to provide early warning. When he needed to use militia in more direct attacks or in holding defensive positions, he interspersed them with the regulars to give them an example to follow when battle was engaged. During movements he positioned militia units in the line of march between Continental units to literally "keep them in line." The regulars were assigned the more difficult missions that required maneuver of larger elements and more restrictive discipline.

The techniques used by George Washington in this short campaign to handle the militia served him well throughout the rest of the revolution. As a leader, he overcame his prejudices toward the ruffians of the militia and developed techniques that allowed him to use them to their maximum effectiveness and at the same time protect their weaknesses.



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## **AN EXAMINATION OF GEORGE WASHINGTON'S EMPLOYMENT OF THE PENNSYLVANIA MILITIA AT THE BATTLES OF TRENTON AND PRINCETON**

The short winter campaign of 1776-1777, including the Battles of Trenton and Princeton, is one of the most important campaigns of the Revolutionary War. This short campaign kept the colonial army and the revolutionary cause alive at a critical time. Each engagement was a training ground on which the army and its leadership grew with the experiences they gained. George Washington's generalship matured as well as he learned how to handle his leaders and his army.

All combat units are not equal. Washington knew it then, just as we know it now. As a strategic leader, his mission was to capitalize on the strengths of each unit by assigning it appropriate missions, while at the same time minimizing the risks to the unit. Easier said than done, this task is one that he understood as a leader going into the battles. By looking at his use of the Pennsylvania militia forces under his command at Trenton and Princeton, we can see that he had developed good techniques for maximizing the effectiveness of the militiamen. In this paper I will deal specifically with George Washington's employment of the Pennsylvania militia forces at his disposal and how he used task assignment to protect the units while still gaining benefits from their presence.

### **MILITIA POLICY OF THE STATE OF PENNSYLVANIA**

During the mid-1700's, Pennsylvania's response to providing for its own security was slow and ineffective. The Quaker controlled Pennsylvania Assembly refused to vote a Militia Act directing the forming and arming of a Pennsylvania militia. By default, the local security of villages and homesteads on the frontier was completely the responsibility of the individuals inhabiting the areas. The Assembly held the view that a militia law would offend Quaker tradition by requiring the citizens of the Commonwealth to accept a military obligation and take up arms<sup>1</sup>.

Indian confrontations on the Pennsylvania frontier continued to increase, and residents continued to petition the Assembly for a Militia Act. In December of 1747 the Pennsylvania Gazette published a proposal by Benjamin Franklin calling for volunteers to form armed and organized companies. His document, the Articles of Association, spurred the growth of Associator companies.<sup>2</sup> These Associators, as they became known, were subject to weekly drill and had to supply themselves with "a good Firelock, Cartouche-box [flintlock and cartridge box], at least 12 Charges of Powder and Ball, and as Many of us as conveniently can, a good Sword, Cutlass or Hanger, to be kept always in our respective Dwellings in Readiness and good

Order.”<sup>3</sup> Although not sponsored by the colony, the Associators were the first organization formed for the defense of the colony.

In November 1755, the Assembly passed The Militia Act of 1755 authorizing a provincial militia. The defeat of Braddock's force in Western Pennsylvania in the summer of 1755, the growing Indian threat and local massacres, and finally pressure from the Crown, succeeded in pushing the Assembly to pass the act. Although this was Pennsylvania's first Militia Act, it really did little more than formalize the volunteer militia. Men still could not be forced to take up arms, they did not have to serve at any location more than three days march from their home, and they could not be required to serve for a period longer than three weeks.<sup>4</sup> Although the resulting force was not a true militia, the Act was still a great victory for those who wanted a militia. As time passed, Quaker control of the Assembly weakened, and in 1757, it passed an act that required all able-bodied men to register for service.

Although this new Act required registration, the Associators continued to be the force of choice in Pennsylvania. They were low cost, they had low resource requirements since each man armed and equipped himself, and they were all volunteers so there were no complaints of forced participation. These men carried the brunt of the defense of the state from 1747 through the early years of the revolution. Every other English colony in America had a compulsory-service militia requiring every able-bodied freeman of appropriate age to bear arms and undergo military training. The Pennsylvania government still refused to require such service.<sup>5</sup>

It was not until March of 1777, that the Assembly passed The Militia Act which required all white males between the ages of 18 and 53 to form into units at county level. Companies were formed of 50-80 men, 8 companies per battalion. Officers were elected and served for 3 year terms. Soldiers could serve no more than 60 days consecutive active duty.<sup>6</sup> Although not a perfect solution in terms of continuity and formation, at least Pennsylvania now had a formal militia. As with any militia unit, training, equipment, and leadership varied greatly from unit to unit and county to county.

#### **ASSOCIATOR/MILITIA CHARACTERISTICS**

The discipline of the new militia units was certainly not to Washington's desired European standard. They were not drilled to strict obedience, and even when formed into units, the Associators and militiaman still favored fighting in loose formations. The units were led by officers elected by the men. Officers were generally elected because of their social status in the community or because of particular warfighting skills they had demonstrated in engagements with the Indians over the years. Experience in leadership and training was almost nonexistent.

While they shared many similarities with the militias from other colonies, the Pennsylvania Associators were experienced in Indian fighting. These men were still involved in frequent fights on the frontier. Many were essentially professional Indian fighters, moving from hot spot to hot spot to protect their families and their friends. They came from the forests where their individualism, independence, and self-reliance kept them alive on a daily basis. No amount of talk or drill was going to convince them to stand and exchange volleys with Redcoats at 50 yards. They had never fought that way, they saw Braddock defeated when he fought that way, and to them there was no honor to be gained by fighting in a fashion they all considered crazy. Of these men, few could be forced to stand in the open and exchange volleys with a British enemy. The experience of the Associators became indispensable.

Their weapons were also not developed for formation fighting. In general, they appeared for battle armed with rifles, not the smoothbore musket/bayonet combination of the Continentals and the British. The rifles were hunting weapons, developed for dropping deer and turkeys at significant ranges. While very accurate and perfect for sniping at Indians in the forest, they were inadequate for volley exchanges. Slow loading and bayonetless, the rifle was no more than a club in hand-to-hand combat. Although the British feared the rifles for their accuracy at long range, they soon learned to close the distance with quick rushes and volleys and finish with a bayonet charge that would inevitably break the militia formations in panic.

#### **MILITARY BACKGROUND AND EXPERIENCE OF GEORGE WASHINGTON**

No discussion of the Revolution is complete without reference to George Washington and his leadership. He was instrumental in making the Revolution successful, and without his poise and sound decision-making the colonies might not have been successful in their quest.

Washington did not have a formal military education. However, his early experiences as a colonial officer serving with British forces on wilderness campaigns did much to develop his opinions about warfare. His mentors were the British generals and officers with whom he worked. Washington's "campfire" discussions with British officers certainly centered on their experiences on European battlefields and shaped his view of what an army should look like and how it should act. Consequently, he emerged from these early experiences with a prejudice toward the European style of warfare. He believed success in battle was dependent on drill, alignment, volley firing, and strict leader control of all battlefield movements.<sup>7</sup> He held the view that, "Discipline is the soul of an army. It makes small numbers formidable; procures success to the weak, and esteem to all."<sup>8</sup> The British focus on training, drill and discipline set the example that Washington desired in his own force.

The fact that George Washington wanted an army that could outfight the British using European tactics presented him with a huge dilemma. He did not have that army at his disposal, and the resources available to the colonies could not produce or equip that army in any timely fashion, if at all. Manpower itself was an issue. Casualties in European warfare were large, even when a battle resulted in victory. There were not enough men in the colonial army to absorb many engagements with the British—even in victory. In addition to manpower, there were few leaders with the necessary experience to train such an army. The training of the army had to come from experience in battle and each “lesson” was costly. Lastly, there was not enough time to train this army—the war was on, and the fight had to be engaged with the army at hand. The time, skill, manpower, and resources were not available for Washington to build the army he wanted; therefore, his challenge was to determine how to best use the assets he had available.

One of these major assets was the militia. George Washington knew that he had to find a way to effectively use the militia forces at his disposal. Although generally less capable than the continental army, collectively these militias were more robust in terms of manpower. Colonists were more likely to turn out to fight when fighting was in the proximity of their homes than they were to join a force that traveled far from their home turf to fight. As fighting moved from region to region, local militias turned out to augment the Continental Army. So, although there were always significant numbers of militia, Washington never knew from battle to battle how many militiamen would actually be fighting.

Unfortunately, Washington's early encounters with militia did little to impress him of their value in a fight. Perhaps one of his most influential experiences was accompanying Braddock on the expedition to force the French from Fort Duquesne. Braddock's European style formation, his well trained and drilled force, was soundly defeated by a force of mixed bush-fighting French and Indians firing from behind trees and rocks. There was no enemy formation to direct the massed volleys against. The enemy was everywhere, and Braddock's crisp, drilled formations collapsed.

This defeat made a great impression on Washington, but instead of recognizing the advantages of the militia force and its style of fighting he returned and “ranged against the undisciplined militia, demanded more rigorous military laws, and tried to organize a new First Virginia Regiment on the model of British Regulars.”<sup>9</sup> The lesson he initially seemed to draw from this defeat was that more discipline, more drill, and more militiamen fighting in formation as regulars may have swayed the battle in Braddock's favor.

Although Washington's first desire always remained that of having disciplined, trained and drilled regular soldiers, Braddock's expedition left an impression in his mind. As time wore on he certainly replayed this battle in his mind and began to recognize some of the advantages of the militia style of warfare. He saw the futility of attacking an enemy force in the wilderness using standard European tactics unless the enemy was using the same formations. He saw the weaknesses inherent in the British line of attack. He saw what a dispersed force using cover rather than advancing in line could do to massed formations. He watched the disciplined British force fall apart when it faced an unknown enemy, and perhaps he saw what the French and Indians did as a model for one method of utilizing his own undisciplined militias.

Not only did Washington have to adapt his ideals on European tactics to effectively use the militia, he also had to learn to deal with the militia officers and men. This may have been one of his biggest challenges. Just as Washington was much more comfortable dealing with a disciplined, uniformed force, he was also more comfortable dealing with disciplined educated "European" individuals than he was dealing with the lower classes of colonials. Although he was a well-grounded, practical man, he was, nonetheless, gentry. He was a gentleman, not a woodsman. He lived on a plantation, not in a cabin carved out of a few acres of wilderness.

Militia officers came from essentially the same class of men as militia soldiers, and Washington's feelings toward most of them are well recorded. Most of Washington's written words regarding the militia officers are not favorable. "Their officers are generally of the lowest class of people and, instead of setting a good example to their men are leading them into every kind of mischief."<sup>10</sup> He recorded his first impression of the Massachusetts's militia officers when he met them in October of 1776. "The officers generally speaking are the most indifferent kind of people I ever saw. They are exceedingly dirty and nasty people."<sup>11</sup>

Perhaps Washington's greatest internal challenge was overcoming his bias about the various militias that he confronted. The internal struggle he had to endure to accept the militia for what it was, both as individual men and units, and his efforts to use it to its fullest advantage were not small challenges for him to overcome. Washington's eventual understanding of his situation and his development of methods to best utilize the militia forces assigned to him was perhaps one of his greatest accomplishments as a leader.

George Washington knew that the militia had strengths that he could use against the British regulars. He saw the advantages of the irregular style of forest warfare, but at the same time he knew the need for drill and control on the battlefield. His challenge throughout the war would be to balance the two. Washington needed to find a way to keep the militia involved. He needed their local knowledge, he needed their scouting ability, and he needed them to harass

the British. Perhaps, most of all, the militia provided a critical link to the local populace; a tie essential for the revolution's success.

During the December 1776 – January 1777 time period George Washington demonstrated that he understood the limitations of the militia and at the same time knew that it could provide valuable services to the cause. He used it wisely throughout this period, capitalizing on its abilities and mitigating its weaknesses.

### **CAMPAIGN SETTING**

The winter campaign was preceded by nearly complete British victory in New York. The Redcoats pushed the young colonial army out of the city, and, in fact, out of the New York colony altogether. There was no silver lining to this loss for General Washington. He had been outfought and out-generaled. Winter was approaching, and with it the campaign season was closing for the year. Washington withdrew his forces into Pennsylvania hoping to avoid major engagements with the British until he had time to regroup and retrain his force. Not expecting active campaigning again until early spring, Washington began to focus his efforts on planning and preparing for the following summer's operations.

Washington's strategy at this point, which was reflected in his plan for upcoming operations against the British, was to protect his army. Losing fights with the British was costly in manpower and supplies, but perhaps more importantly it was costly in government support, civilian morale, and soldier morale. Washington knew he had to fight the British, but he also knew that another defeat like New York might spell the end of the Revolution and bring an early death of the colonial cause. His overall campaign strategy became a "defensive" one but not one that relied entirely on defensive tactics.

In this short campaign, Washington succeeded with maneuver, always looking for positional advantage over the opposing British force. If he was outmaneuvered, he avoided the fight. Nathaniel Greene summed up the strategy perfectly: "Tis our business to study to avoid any considerable misfortune, and to take post where the enemy will be obliged to fight us, and not us them."<sup>12</sup>

For George Washington saving the Army became synonymous with saving the cause. This campaign was the first look General Washington gave the British at what was to be his strategy for the remainder of the war. He was maturing as a commander and was learning. As the war continued he offered the British fewer set piece battles. Direct force-on-force battle provided the opportunity for tallying victories on the battlefield, but Washington knew that a single decisive defeat could mean complete loss of the war for the colonials. "Previously,

General Washington's primary thrust had been to defeat enemy forces; now his foremost imperative was to prevent a decisive defeat of his own army. He was clearly expected to stand and fight, but it would have to be in such a way that he could always disengage to fight another day."<sup>13</sup> Summarized simply—you can't lose big if you don't fight big.

Howe reflected his frustrations with the success of Washington's strategy in his comment regarding attempts to force the Colonials to fight a decisive battle. "I invariably pursued the most probable means of forcing its commander into action."<sup>14</sup>

Washington was almost completely successful in executing his campaign strategy. He refused to fight in open country, and Lord Howe generally refused to attack when the patriots had strong lines. Nathaniel Greene marveled at George Washington's ability to "skirmish with the enemy at all times and [yet] avoid a general engagement."<sup>15</sup>

Despite this campaign philosophy, Washington also knew that simply winning small skirmishes would not keep the cause alive. He knew he needed a few larger victories, or he risked having the Army literally die during the winter because of lack of a single significant victory.<sup>16</sup> Washington's goal was not the destruction of the British Army, just enough of a win to keep the team alive.

## **ANALYSIS OF THE INDIVIDUAL BATTLES OF THE CAMPAIGN**

### **1<sup>ST</sup> TRENTON, DECEMBER 26, 1776**

As George Washington led the colonial army out of New York, the recent defeat at Fort Mifflin was fresh in everyone's mind. The army was dejected. It had lost nearly every battle with the British in the last five months and was again being driven from the battlefield. The colonial cause was in great jeopardy. Morale of both the army and the people was at ebb. Borderline supporters of the revolution were shifting back to the British side, and Congress had fled the capital of Philadelphia for the relative safety of Lancaster and York. The army had been reduced through casualties, enlistment expirations, and disease from about 20,000 to only 8,000 men.<sup>17</sup> Of the 8,000, many had service obligations that were to expire at the end of the year.<sup>18</sup> About 1,100 of the men fleeing from New York were the remnants of 2,500 Pennsylvania Associators that served Washington in New York.<sup>19</sup>

While Washington's army was retreating in November and December of 1776, the British under Howe were enjoying yet another victory. Morale of the British army was correspondingly high, and there was no evidence that expectations should not remain so through the winter. There was a real possibility that the war against the rebels could be completed with victory the following spring. Howe's forces followed the Continental Army across New Jersey, to the



Delaware River. Howe then dispersed his army throughout New York and New Jersey and established winter quarters. Howe considered the active campaigning season over. The British element assigned to garrison Trenton, New Jersey, was only a fraction of the British force and totaled about 1,500 Hessians.<sup>20</sup>

Washington certainly hoped Howe would consider the campaign season over and not pursue him across the Delaware River. He knew that entering winter quarters fresh from another defeat would cause the low morale of the men to fester over the winter. He would have a deep emotional pit to fight out of in the spring. Washington needed to restore the public's confidence in him and in the army's ability. He did not know that the opportunity for a final victory of the season was about to be presented to him.

As Washington's forces crossed the Delaware from New Jersey, the number of Pennsylvanians in the force grew. The battle was now on the Pennsylvania border, and militia units and Associators from Pennsylvania showed up to fight. Thomas Mifflin was one of the Pennsylvania militia commanders. He wrote to Washington that, "Pennsylvania is at length roused and coming forward to your Excellency's aid." Militiamen were turning out faster than they could be organized into units. Mifflin worked to organize nearly 1,500 men from numerous militia regiments and companies. He formed them into a brigade under his own command.<sup>21</sup> At the same time Colonel John Cadwalader led 1,800 Associators from the Philadelphia area to join Washington.<sup>22</sup> Lastly, Brigadier General James Ewing brought in a third Pennsylvania militia brigade of 800 men from Cumberland, York, Chester, and Lancaster counties.<sup>23</sup>

Washington immediately assigned reasonable security and intelligence tasks to the Pennsylvania Associators and militia. Simultaneously, his Continentals formed a hasty defensive line on the Pennsylvania side of the Delaware. He used the militia mainly as a screen capitalizing on their local knowledge of the road network and the people to exploit the benefits the irregulars could provide.

Cadwalader's units guarded the Delaware River crossing at Bristol and at Dunk's ferry to prevent any surprise crossings by the British.<sup>24</sup> Ewing was assigned the ferry crossings at Trenton and Yardley's Ferries. Washington's instructions to Ewing were clear, "Guard the river and collect intelligence. Spare no pains, nor cost to gain information of the Enemy's movements, and designs. Every piece of information worthy of communication transmit to me without loss of time."<sup>25</sup> Ewing interpreted this guidance loosely and raided Trenton each night, gaining knowledge of the Hessian garrison's defense. The secondary effect of this harassment was that it kept the British on edge. The Hessians had to maintain a continuous state of alert, and rest was consequently difficult.

While Washington did not specifically direct Ewing's river crossing operations, he was keen enough to take advantage of the information they provided and the effect they had of harassing the Hessians to the north and south of Trenton. Ewing and other independent militia commanders executed small operations on priority targets inside their own areas of operations, almost at will, and then faded away into the countryside. The militia was successful in keeping the British on edge and in providing Washington the intelligence he needed.

As Washington designed his plan for the battle he again assigned specific missions to the militia units. In this case he clearly made a conscious decision to assign supporting tasks to the militia. Success or failure of the militia missions would not heavily impact the overall success of the outcome of the battle.

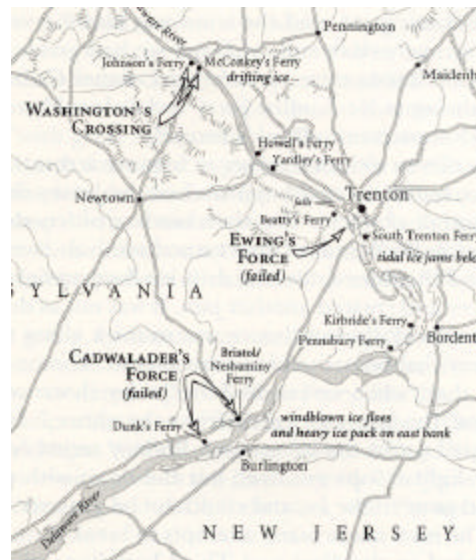


FIGURE 1. DELAWARE RIVER CROSSING POINTS<sup>26</sup>

Washington planned to cross the river with his main force about 10 miles upstream from Trenton. The 2,400 men in this column were almost entirely colonial regulars. He ordered James Ewing's 800 Pennsylvania militia to cross at Trenton Ferry, just south of Trenton falls. Their mission was to seize and hold the bridge across Assunpink Creek and block the only exit from the town to the southeast.<sup>27</sup> He ordered Colonel Cadwalader with his 1,200 Associators and 600 New England regulars to cross the river 12 miles below Trenton at Bristol. His mission was to occupy the attention of the Hessians in Trenton and larger British reinforcing forces to

the South. Washington ordered, "If you can do nothing real, at least create as great a diversion as possible."<sup>28</sup> In addition to these missions, some of the Pennsylvania Associators were used as boatmen in the crossing because of their skills and local river knowledge.<sup>29</sup>

Washington's mission assignments for this fight were good ones—partially because he had a good understanding of the capability of the militia and partially because he was lucky. Success of the militia missions was not essential for overall success of the operation, but if these missions were carried out properly they would be useful in diverting the focus of the Hessians in Trenton and would certainly assist in diverting any counterattack forces dispatched toward Trenton. They were economy of force missions. Washington knew what he could reasonably expect the militia to accomplish.

Very few of the Pennsylvania militiamen actually made it across the Delaware. At Trenton Falls, Ewing's men could not cross because of an ice jam at the falls. For Cadwalader the problem was ice piled on the far shore of the river that prevented unloading of the boats.<sup>30</sup> Because the missions were not "single points of failure" they had no impact on the success of the operation. In fact, had Ewing been successful in his crossing and blocked the bridge at Assunpink Creek the battle may have had a completely different outcome. Washington's forces were slow crossing in the north and were even slower moving south to attack Trenton, and the actual attack on Trenton was initiated several hours behind schedule. The Hessians would certainly have discovered a successful crossing by Ewing and Washington's surprise attack would have been compromised. The Hessians would have been on full alert by the time Washington initiated his attack.

Trenton was a significant loss for the British Army. Two thousand four hundred colonials fought 1,500 Hessians in a two hour battle that had lasting effects and an impact far beyond the scale of the battle.<sup>31</sup> The short, surprise engagement cost the Hessians 918 men--22 killed, 83 seriously wounded and 896 captured.<sup>32</sup> Colonial casualties were almost nonexistent. Two soldiers froze to death along the line of march and four men were wounded in the engagement.<sup>33</sup> This relatively small event had incredible importance on the world stage and pumped a new vigor into the men who fought for Washington and the leaders who led them. This single victory saved the Army from almost certain collapse in the coming winter and set the stage for a short ten-day winter campaign that revived the force.

## 2D TRENTON, JANUARY 2, 1777

On January 2, 1777, there was a second battle of Trenton. Overshadowed by the news of the first victory that was still being passed through the countryside, this victory was less

spectacular than the first but provides another look at Washington's employment of the militia in a fight that would require holding a defensive line against a deliberate British attack. His understanding of the militiaman's inability to stand toe-to-toe with the British regular is apparent in his task assignment and positioning of militia units to repel the assault.

Following the defeat of the Hessians, General Howe directed General Cornwallis to join him at Princeton. Howe ordered Cornwallis to find the rebel army and destroy it. Cornwallis quickly led 8,000 men out of Princeton toward Trenton.<sup>34</sup> Small units of colonial riflemen delayed and harassed the British forces moving on a single route toward Trenton. Simultaneously, Washington spent his time positioning his fighting elements in Trenton expecting a full scale British assault. As the British and Hessians moved into Trenton from the north, the colonial regulars fought a delaying action through the streets of Trenton and finally crossed over Assunpink Creek and occupied the high ground south of the creek facing Cornwallis's advancing force.

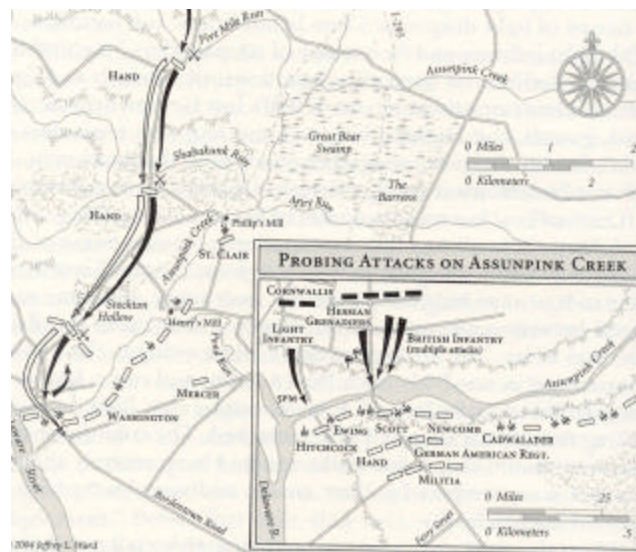


FIGURE 2. 2D TRENTON EMPLACEMENT OF FORCES<sup>35</sup>

Washington's plan for positioning of forces as they crossed the bridge demonstrated a unique method of handling the unpredictable militia forces while still getting the benefit of the combat power they offered. He used the Continental line regulars to guard the bridge and the two key fords. Washington then interspersed militia units between the regulars. The Virginia

regulars, reinforced with numerous artillery pieces, were assigned the bridge crossing. To their left Washington posted Ewing's Pennsylvania militia; on the right he posted the New Jersey militia under Newcomb. Cadwalader's Pennsylvania Associators were on the right of the line posted on the main road to prevent a flank attack from surprising the line of battle.<sup>36</sup> As the British used repeated frontal attacks on the crossing points, Washington ordered Cadwalader's Associators, who were as yet unengaged, to reinforce the main line of battle near the bridge.<sup>37</sup> In making this reallocation of forces, Washington expected that the Associators would stand against the British if they were paired with a strong Continental unit. He still realized they could not be assigned this type task alone because they lacked the discipline to hold in the face of a British assault.

While this second battle of Trenton was certainly less spectacular, it was no less revealing in looking at Washington's understanding of his militia. Interspersing the militia units amongst the regulars was certainly not doctrine of the time. Washington broke up the Pennsylvania militia into smaller elements, and by doing so he allowed the steadiness of the regulars in the face of a determined attack to help "prop" up the spirits of the militia and keep them from breaking and running. Militia forces were known for their lack of ability to withstand a British attack. Although they deserved this reputation, one must also remember that their equipment did not include the musket/bayonet combination needed for hand-to-hand combat.

This second Battle of Trenton also ended on favorable terms for the Colonials. The British lost an estimated 365 men killed, wounded, and captured. The Colonial losses were estimated to be around 50.<sup>38</sup> Although they suffered fewer casualties, in this fight Cornwallis led the British personally, which increased the political and morale impact of the loss.

#### PRINCETON, JANUARY 3, 1777

The Battle of Princeton, was the final engagement of the short colonial offensive that closed the 1776 campaign. After the British attempts to force a crossing at Assunpink Creek on the evening of 2 January, General Washington held a council of war. His scouts determined that Cornwallis was moving some of his forces to the east and concentrating them in a wooded area with the intent of flanking the colonial right the following morning.<sup>39</sup> A mounted reconnaissance had also determined that the road network was clear to Princeton and Brunswick, the British rear.<sup>40</sup> The council agreed on a plan for a nighttime withdrawal from current positions and a night march to Princeton with the intent of striking the British forces remaining there.<sup>41</sup>

As the force neared Princeton Washington stopped the column and reorganized his forces for the attack. No doubt, as he rode through the night from Trenton, he had been thinking about how he wanted to form for the attack. After crossing Stony Brook Bridge, Washington split his force into two columns for the final advance on Princeton. Each of the wings had Continental troops in the lead and rear with militia units in the center.<sup>42</sup> This deliberate re-positioning of militia units again illustrates Washington's realization that propping up militia units by surrounding them with Regulars was a good technique.

Nathaniel Greene commanded the left wing column and was intended to be the supporting attack. His force included Cadwalader's 1200 Associators. One of Greene's primary missions was to destroy the bridge at Worth's Mill, to the west of Princeton. Destruction of the bridge would prevent British reinforcements from returning to Princeton from Trenton and, at the same time, seal the British forces in Princeton and prevent any attempts they might make to link-up with Cornwallis' forces in Trenton.<sup>43</sup> The remaining elements of Greene's force were to attack Princeton from the southwest using Princeton Road as their approach route.

General John Sullivan commanded the other wing of the force with General Washington in accompaniment. This force was the main effort for the attack and included Pennsylvania militia units integrated with the Pennsylvania Brigade of Continentals commanded by Thomas Mifflin.<sup>44</sup>

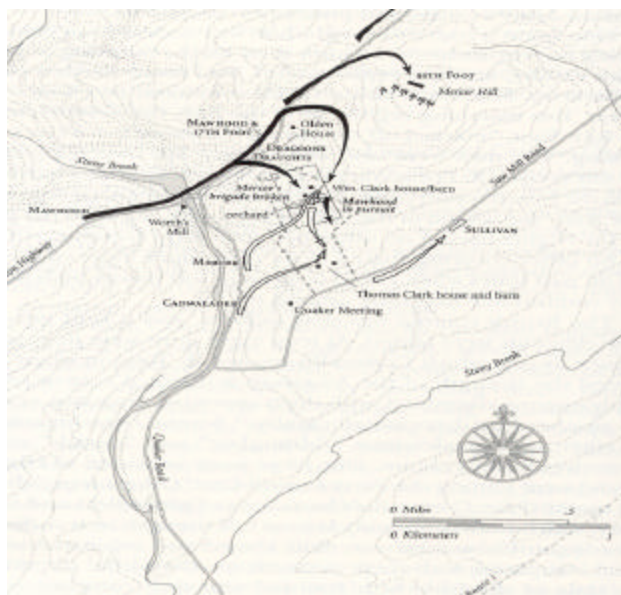


FIGURE 3. BATTLE OF PRINCETON<sup>45</sup>

While Washington closed his force on Princeton, the British there were already moving out of town to join Cornwallis at Trenton. Cornwallis had previously ordered Colonel Mahood, the British commander at Princeton, to move his brigade to reinforce Trenton. As Greene's column moved northwest along the creek toward Worth's Mill, it encountered British forces already forming in line of battle.<sup>46</sup> The British had seen them first and had already begun forming in line. Greene ordered his lead element of regulars to attack the British, and the British broke their attack. As the Associators moved forward, the lead regiment of Continentals was fleeing. The sight of the Continental Regulars in flight caused the Associators to break and run as well.

Several of the stronger leaders of the Associators rallied their men and began reforming the fleeing militiamen.<sup>47</sup> Washington watched the initial engagement from Sullivan's position and immediately diverted elements from Sullivan's force to reinforce Greene. Washington arrived at the fight with elements of Sullivan's column, joined the Associators, and personally led them in an assault, driving the British back to Princeton where they were defeated.<sup>48</sup>

At the battle of Princeton, Washington organized for combat by splitting the militia forces and putting some with each of his columns. Within the wings he directed their positioning between the regulars. Interestingly enough, the Pennsylvania Associators with Greene were assigned as a supporting effort to Greene's supporting attack. Had the British force not engaged Greene as he moved toward the bridge, they would probably have done little or nothing on this mission. But, as the battle unfolded, the Associators with Greene became the key to success or failure in the Battle of Princeton. Under Washington's direct leadership the Pennsylvania Associators held long enough for the rest of the army to form and attack. The Associators became the main effort in breaking Mahood's line and held long enough for Sullivan's Continentals to join the battle. Had the Pennsylvania men broken the British may well have carried the day.

At the conclusion of the Battle of Princeton the Americans had lost about 40 men killed and wounded. British losses were listed as 28 killed, 58 wounded and 187 missing. Washington immediately led his army out of Princeton. Cornwallis only offered a short pursuit, so the Colonial army was able to withdraw into New Jersey and garrison itself for the remainder of the winter.<sup>49</sup>

## **CONCLUSION**

The victories of the Colonials over the British at Trenton and Princeton saved the revolution from collapse. On the British side they forced Howe to include descriptions of the defeats in his final report of the season to the Crown. Months of successful British campaigning

and victories were erased in this short ten-day campaign. British papers had all winter to lament the defeat handed to their forces by the colonial rabble, and the debates on how and why this happened carried through the winter spreading doubt that an eventual victory was assured. As word of the campaign spread through Europe, even Frederick the Great commented that the Christmas campaign was “the most brilliant of any recorded in the annals of military achievement.”<sup>50</sup> The battles forced the British to admit that they were not invincible.

On the colonial side the victory brought the ability of the Continental Army and its leaders to the forefront of world attention. The victory allowed Washington to close the season on a high note. The successes of the army reinvigorated the people and stemmed the flow of colonists that had been returning to the British cause. It also restored Congress' faith in Washington's leadership. The campaign increased Washington's confidence in himself and his army as well. The experience he gained here in handling his army carried him through the war. He learned a few techniques for dealing with the militia. The techniques Washington implemented at Trenton and Princeton showed his complete understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of his militia. Regardless of the colony from which the militia came, their strengths and weaknesses were very similar.

Washington knew that militiamen could provide great local knowledge and experience, they were extremely patriotic and wanted to contribute to the cause, they were good at scouting, harassing, and taking part in small scale attacks. At the same time he realized that the militia was not good at large scale European engagements at close range. They were not armed with bayonets. They did not have the discipline to stand and exchange volleys with the British.

In this short campaign George Washington took maximum advantage of the militia's strengths by using them as scouts and boatmen. Militia also served in economy of force missions that supported the plan. Sometimes militia units were positioned on extreme flanks to serve as early warning. In such missions Washington did not expect them to defeat British bayonet attacks, just to fight long enough to spoil British surprise and give Washington time to reposition Continentals to meet the attack. When he needed to use militia in more direct attacks or in holding defensive positions, he interspersed them with the regulars to give them an example to follow when the battle was engaged. During movements he positioned the militia in the line of march between Continental units to literally “keep them in line.” The regulars were assigned the missions that required difficult maneuver of larger elements and more restrictive discipline.

The techniques used by George Washington in this short campaign to handle the militia served him well throughout the rest of the revolution. As a leader, he overcame his prejudices



toward the ruffians of the militia and developed techniques that allowed him to use them to their maximum effectiveness and at the same time protect their weaknesses.

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## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup>Samuel Newland, *The Pennsylvania Militia: Defending the Commonwealth and the Nation: 1669-1870* (Fort Indiantown Gap, PA: Pennsylvania National Guard Foundation, 2002), 26.

<sup>2</sup>*Ibid.*, 38.

<sup>3</sup>*Ibid.*, 29.

<sup>4</sup>*Statutes at Large of Pennsylvania, 1682-1801*, vol V, 1744-1759 (Harrisburg, Pennsylvania: State Printer, 1898), 197-201.

<sup>5</sup>John B. Trussell, "Revolution to Whiskey Rebellion," in *The First Century: A History of the 28<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division*, ed. Robert Grant Crist (Harrisburg, Pennsylvania: Stackpole Books, 1979), 18.

<sup>6</sup>*Ibid.*, 33.

<sup>7</sup>Dave Richard Palmer, *The Way of The Fox: American Strategy in the War for America, 1775-1783* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1975), 15.

<sup>8</sup>David Hackett Fischer, *Washington's Crossing* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 27.

<sup>9</sup>*Ibid.*, 15.

<sup>10</sup>Bruce Chadwick, *George Washington's War: The Forging of a Revolutionary Leader and the American Presidency* (Naperville, Illinois: Sourcebooks, Inc., 2004), 154.

<sup>11</sup>Fischer, 19.

<sup>12</sup>Palmer, 124.

<sup>13</sup>*Ibid.*, 116.

<sup>14</sup>*Ibid.*, 39.

<sup>15</sup>*Ibid.*, 126.

<sup>16</sup>Russell F. Weigley, "American Strategy from Its Beginnings through the First World War," in *Makers of Modern Strategy from Machiavelli to the Nuclear Age*, ed. Peter Paret (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1986), 411.

<sup>17</sup>Richard L. Blanco, ed. *The American Revolution, 1775-1783: An Encyclopedia*, vol II (M-Z), (New York: Garland Publishing, 1993), 1651.

<sup>18</sup>Fischer, 127.

<sup>19</sup>Trussell, 32.

<sup>20</sup>William M. Dwyer, *The Day is Ours: November 1776-January 1777: An Inside View of the Battles of Trenton and Princeton* (New York: The Viking Press, 1983), 152.

<sup>21</sup>Fischer, 275.

<sup>22</sup>Dwyer, 239.

<sup>23</sup>Ray Thompson, *Washington Along the Delaware: The Battles of Trenton and Princeton* (Fort Washington, PA: The Bicentennial Press, 1970), 13.

<sup>24</sup>Frederic A. Godcharles, *Pennsylvania, Political, Governmental, Military and Civil*, military vol, (New York: The American Historical Society, 1933), 193.

<sup>25</sup>Fischer, 195.

<sup>26</sup>*Ibid.*, 213.

<sup>27</sup>Dwyer, 212.

<sup>28</sup>*Ibid.*, 239.

<sup>29</sup>Newland, 128.

<sup>30</sup>Fischer, 213.

<sup>31</sup>*Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>32</sup>*Ibid.*, 254.

<sup>33</sup>Blanco, 1656.

<sup>34</sup>William S. Stryker, *The Battles of Trenton and Princeton* (Boston: Riverside Press, 1898), 248.

<sup>35</sup>Fischer, 294.

<sup>36</sup>Thompson, 58.

<sup>37</sup>Fischer, 306.

<sup>38</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>39</sup>Dwyer, 328.

<sup>40</sup>Alfred Hoyt Bill, *The Campaign of Princeton: 1776-1777* (Princeton, New Jersey: University Press, 1948), 92.

<sup>41</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>42</sup>Fischer, 323.

<sup>43</sup>*Ibid.*, 324.

<sup>44</sup>*Ibid.*, 325.

<sup>45</sup>Ibid., 328.

<sup>46</sup>Richard M. Ketchum, *The Winter Soldiers* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1973), 354.

<sup>47</sup>Fischer, 334.

<sup>48</sup>John Blair Linn, *Annals of Buffalo Valley Pennsylvania: 1755-1855* (Swengel, Pennsylvania: Reiner Publications, 1975), 141.

<sup>49</sup>Blanco, 1328.

<sup>50</sup>Chadwick, 35.



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